64 Xavier

When Shooting Stars Fall

+ LOVE·AND·DEEPSPACE + +

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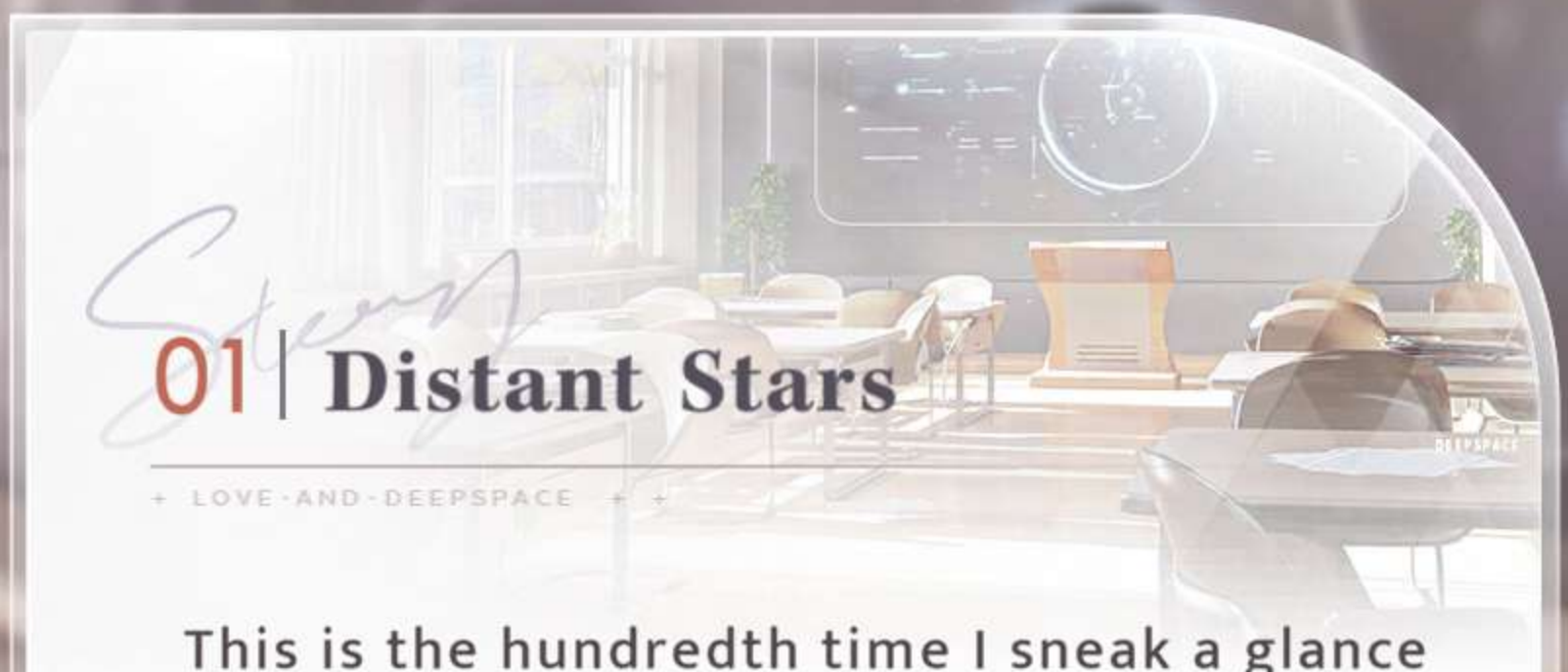

01 | Distant Stars

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

This is the hundredth time I sneak a glance at Xavier. You must first pretend to look at the clock on the classroom wall. Then your gaze can slowly drift to his face. You have to calm down your beating heart and do your best to avoid his gaze. Otherwise, you'll be like me—caught red-handed. Pretending to be nonchalant, I shift my gaze away from those tranquil eyes and turn around. According to the First Law of Cosmic Attraction, when a person unwittingly looks at someone, there's a 98.8% chance it's because he's looking at

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+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

you too.

Perhaps I caught him red-handed as he stared at me.

That's what I tell myself, in any case.

Three years ago, when Xavier first arrived at the Academy, it was a rare, sunny day. It was the Year 214. Two hundred and fourteen years have passed since Philos's birth. It also means 214 years have passed since Earth's demise.

Our teachers, born during the Age of Earth, said we had substituted Earth's

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extinguished core with a powerful, artificial one. This core holds fragmented landmasses together, preventing them from scattering into the starry sea.

So aside from more dust, more cloudy days, and cumbersome travel between tectonic plates, our planet isn't much different from the Earth of years past.

My feet have never touched the soil of other places on Philos. Our Plate where the Academy is located is quite small. Also, unlike us, who were brought here after our Evol awakened, Xavier was a transfer

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student.

Perchance it was the splendid sunshine—or something else—but I can always vividly recall the first time I saw him. He was tall, skinny, wearing a white school uniform. His eyes were a shade of light blue as pretty as the sky that day. Xavier entered the classroom with a wooden sword strapped to his back. He glanced at the seating chart, walked to the last row by the window, and sat down without a word. Serene and precise like light itself.

Since then, other than "thank you" and

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"excuse me," he and I barely talked. I got to know him through my classmates' words. They say he doesn't live on campus because his family background is complicated, and many people have seen him surrounded by bodyguards. These rumors get even more outrageous and mysterious the more they are passed around.

Yet the more enigmatic he is, the more curious I am about Xavier.

I wish to know his thoughts when he's staring off into space during lecture, what

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he's listening to when he wears earbuds, where he goes to hone his swordsmanship and how he's talented in it, and how high his IQ is because he's always the top of the class despite clearly never paying attention during lecture. There were times when I noticed him sleeping. I tried using my Evol to resonate with his dreams. But whenever I do, I get too nervous and fail. After that, I realize quite belatedly that this curiosity of mine is actually a crush.

I always thought Xavier and I would

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01 | Distant Stars

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continue like this, coexisting yet separated by a wall of mist.

But then, during our astronomy lecture, our teacher mentioned a once-in-a-century meteor shower happening next month.

Seeing a meteor shower on a planet where clear skies are a rarity... It's even a once-in-a-century event.

If I can see it with someone I like, then I can die without regrets.

02 | Gravity

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

The sun is like a red-hot iron, burning a hole into the sky. Xavier stands under its crimson glow, practicing his newly learned sword techniques. The whole sequence of events feels otherworldly, deterring people from approaching and thus interrupting him.

Not too far away, I sit under the porch and hold a wooden sword. As I watch him train, I think about how to ask him. Knowing I'll forget half the things I want to say, I start writing words in the dirt with my sword.

Once-in-a-century events aren't significant

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02 | Gravity

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

for Philos's denizens anymore.

People like Xavier, they'll experience many centuries. As long as Philos's core still has energy, their lives shall last forevermore like the planet's.

If he learns I'm a person who can't even live to see 100 years, he'll do anything I say out of pity. That would ruin everything.

At long last, class ends. I stand up and find my target has disappeared. I look around and eventually spot him in the crowd by the Academy's gates.

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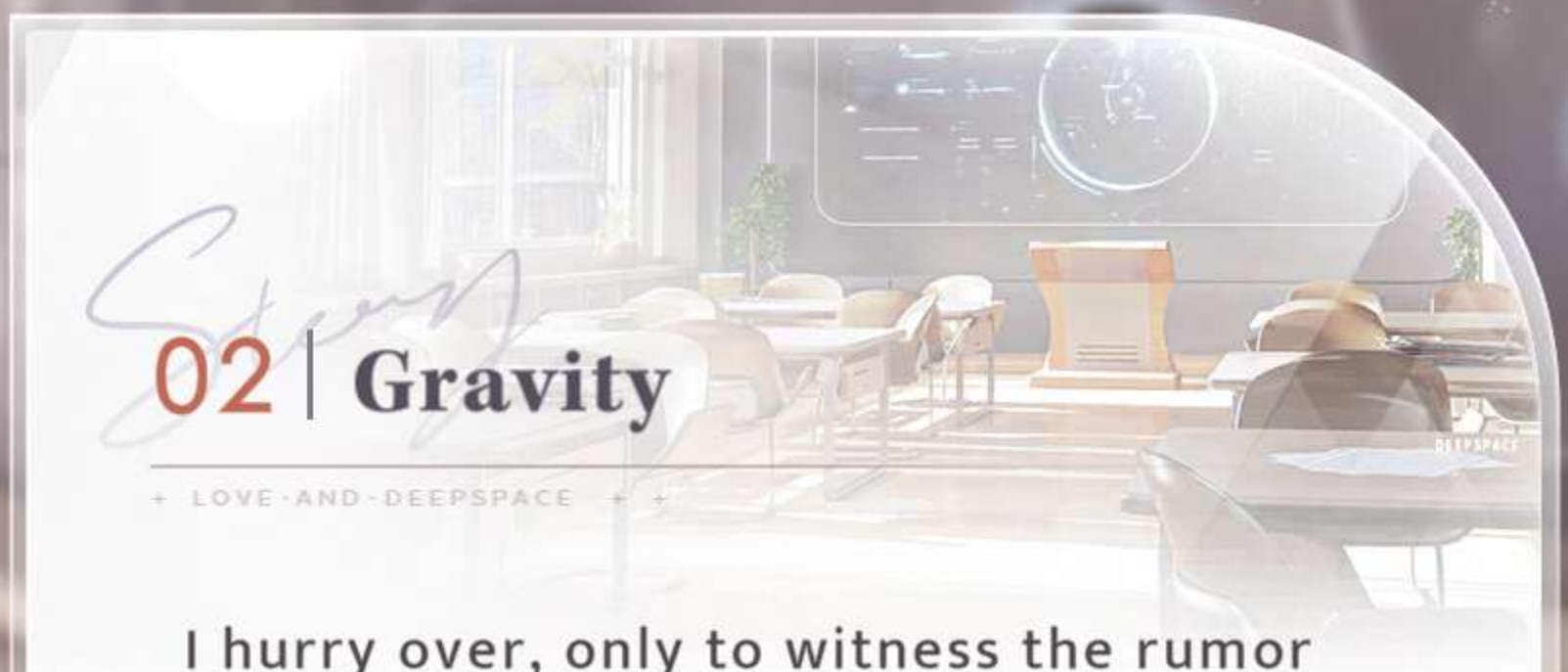

Story

02 | Gravity

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

I hurry over, only to witness the rumor firsthand.

They aren't clad in all black as one would expect, and they keep a respectable distance away from Xavier. Still, these people exude an air of oppression.

Xavier, with his bag, is at the center of their group. It seems he's used to being stared at. The only difference is that rather than being his usual expressionless self, he appears slightly upset.

It's completely different from how he was

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earlier with the sunset behind him.

I know nothing of his past, nor do I know where those people are taking him. All I know is that he's not happy at the moment.

"Xavier!"

I shout his name as loudly as I can. Only after it leaves my mouth do I realize it's most likely the first time I have *ever* called out to him.

The evening breeze rushes through the streets. In the sea of people, he turns around. His slightly puzzled expression

02 | Gravity

softens when our eyes meet.

I walk up to him, saying a teacher has requested his presence. Then I grab his hand and start running in the opposite direction.

As for where we're headed, I haven't thought that far yet. And although I don't see Xavier's expression, his grip on my hand gradually tightens.

"They're catching up." His voice scatters in the wind.

While I'm dazed, Xavier pulls me into a round tower and enters an empty

02 | Gravity

auditorium.

The lights are off. He and I are like animals who escaped their cages, breathing in the dark. Through the sliver of light leaking in through the window, I stare at the shadow of his hand on the window sill. My heart is about to leap out of my throat.

Some time passes, and Xavier pulls out a nearby chair and sits on another desk. I stare at him for a moment before realizing he's asking me to sit.

"Why did you help me?" Sitting on the table, he's taller than me by a considerable

02 | Gravity

amount. His eyes, swirling light in their depths, look down at me in the dark.

"You appeared to be upset, so I thought you wanted to be free."

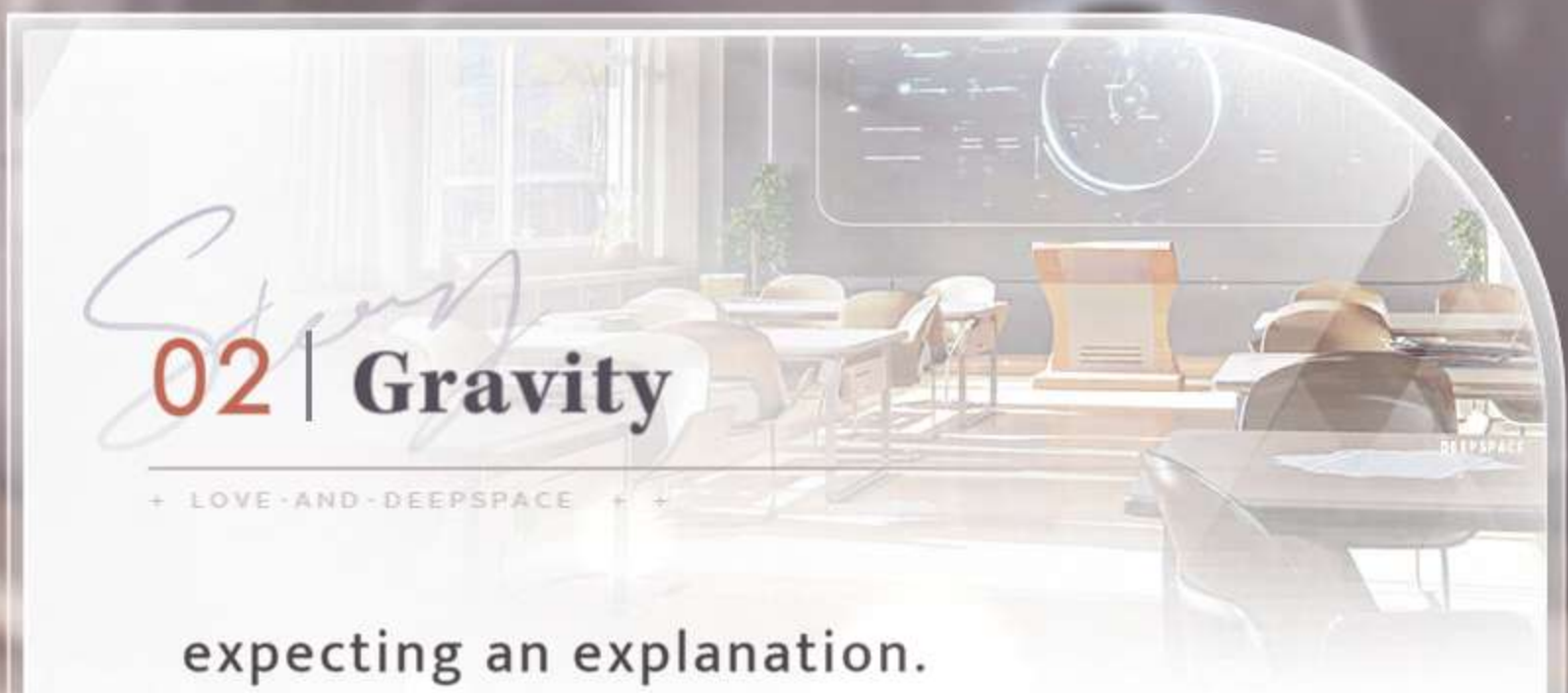
"How did you know I was upset?"

"Well... We're classmates, aren't we? It's normal for me to be able to read your expression!"

As I try to find a way to explain myself, Xavier speaks. "You learned by sneaking glances at me during class?"

"...There's a reason for that!"

Xavier looks at me, as though he's



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expecting an explanation.

"I wanted to ask... Oh no, I mean, I wanted to invite you to watch the meteor shower at Skymirror Salt Flat with me. I heard the lake is very shallow, so when light reflects on its surface, it's exactly like a mirror. It's going to look stunning with the meteor shower! Besides, a once-in-a-century thing... There won't be a next time!"

"It's just another hundred years."

"For you, maybe! But for me..."

"Huh?"

"It's nothing. You'll... Do you want to go or

02 | Gravity

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

not? It's truly pretty!"

I take my chance to invite him, but when I'm met with silence, I can feel my heart fall to the ground with a heavy thud.

Xavier's gaze becomes distant. He only responds to me after some time has passed.

"I can't."

"Is it because of those..." I hesitate, wondering what to call them. "People?"

Xavier appears shocked, then he nods without saying a word.

I don't force him to elaborate and observe

02 | Gravity

the way he looks at me. I reach out and poke the corner of his mouth. "Don't be sad. I'll just go by myself... I'll bring your wish to the stars when I do. What's your wish?"

"I don't have one."

"How could someone not wish for anything? Oh, do you want me to make a wish for you?"

I stand up from the chair and face him. I close my eyes with my hands clasped in front of me, wishing with all my heart. "I wish Xavier is forever free to do what he

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02 | Gravity

wants."

Xavier is stunned. He asks, "What about you? What's your wish?"

"I wish I could be healthy, but I don't even know if wishing on a star actually works."

I stay quiet, waiting for the shooting star in my heart to pass before I open my eyes.

Suddenly, a flash of starlight appears. I look around, only to see it's actually light from Xavier's hand. It glows in the dark.

"This shooting star has made a promise to you."

03 | Collision

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE +

The weather forecast says it's going to be a clear day today, but there's only heavy rain in the afternoon. Fat water droplets cling to glass windows, blurring the gray outdoors into blobs of color. I glance at the empty space by my desk, recalling I left my umbrella in my dorm. The fragrance of flowers in the botany lecture hall is slowly putting me to sleep. I tear off a piece of paper to write my sorrows.

">A< Ugh, it's so annoying. I can't believe it's raining. I also didn't bring my umbrella today. What about you?"

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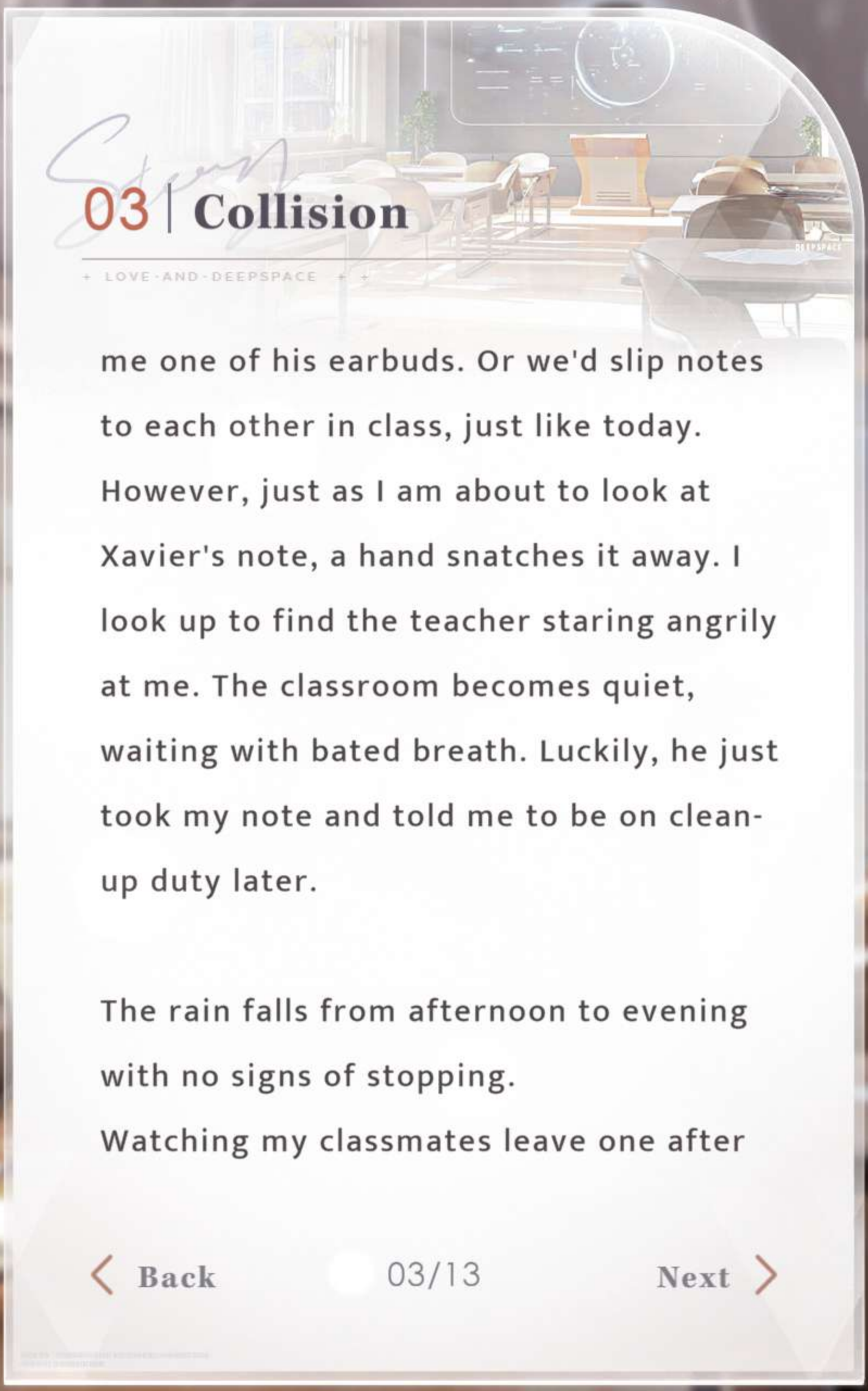
03 | Collision

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

I tear the paper, scrunch it into a ball, and then throw it at Xavier's desk when the teacher isn't looking. I hear two swishes before receiving his reply. Ever since that night, something changed between me and Xavier. At first glance, everything remains the same. He's still being "protected" and leaves school right when the bell rings. We don't have any interactions outside of school, either. It's just I sometimes "carelessly" walk into those "people," and then wave goodbye to him. He'd also sometimes poke me in the back and give



03 | Collision

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

me one of his earbuds. Or we'd slip notes to each other in class, just like today. However, just as I am about to look at Xavier's note, a hand snatches it away. I look up to find the teacher staring angrily at me. The classroom becomes quiet, waiting with bated breath. Luckily, he just took my note and told me to be on clean-up duty later.

The rain falls from afternoon to evening with no signs of stopping.

Watching my classmates leave one after

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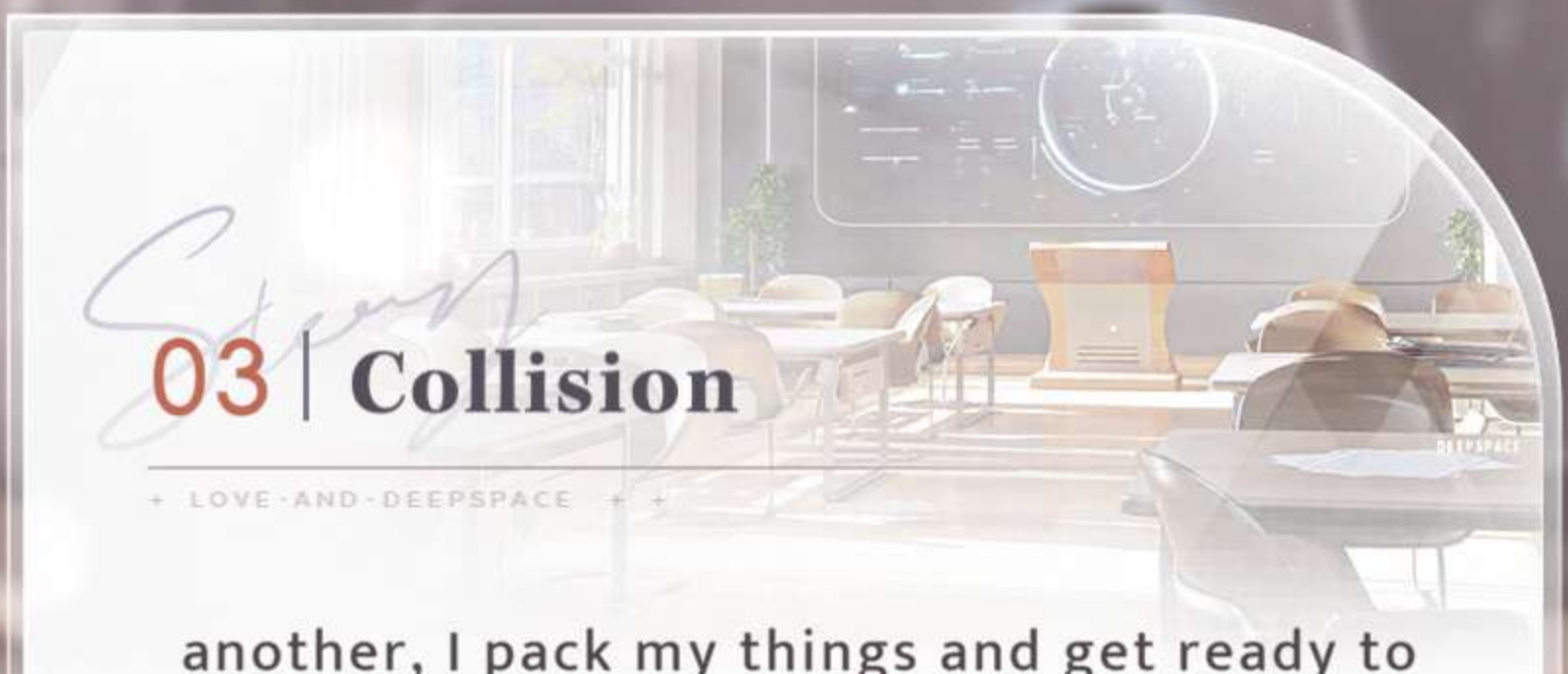

03 | Collision

another, I pack my things and get ready to start my clean-up duties with the desks and chairs. When I turn around, I notice Xavier sitting at his desk. I rub my eyes, wondering if today is a special day.

"Did you stay behind to help me clean up?"

Xavier shakes his head and takes out an umbrella from his bag, placing it on the table in front of me. "I stayed to tell you that I brought an umbrella."

I recall the note the teacher took from me with its half-revealed answer, and stand there like an idiot.

03 | Collision

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

"But those people..." I look out the window in a panic. "They're going to be watching us, right?!"

"Maybe," Xavier says. He opens his hand, and all the light in the room gathers onto his palm. "Now they won't be able to see anything."

Under an already gloomy sky, the lack of a light source makes everything more dim, secretive. I try to appear calm as I look away. "But now it's too dark to clean up."

"Are you waiting for the rain to stop?"

Xavier holds a towel, watching me from

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03 | Collision

the classroom doorway.

I come back to my senses and run to him.

With Xavier's help, my work gets done in no time. After I put away the cleaning supplies, I find him idling on the stone steps in front of the building.
Seeing me approach, he opens his umbrella and says, "Let's go."
Under the umbrella, it's almost as if the storm outside has nothing to do with us.
While Xavier listens to me ramble on about the impression I had of him, I notice the

03 | Collision

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

corner of his mouth curling up.

"You're smiling a lot more since we've met, Xavier."

"...Shouldn't you have heard that from other people already?"

"Fine, suit yourself!" I huff, continuing to walk alongside him.

And, of course, when silence falls between the two of us, my stomach lets out a loud, long groan. I look at Xavier immediately.

He looks back at me with a blank stare.

Then, there is mirth in his eyes. "Do you want something to eat?"

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+ LOVE·AND·DEEPSPACE + +

"But it's so late now... Are you allowed to?"

I scan our surroundings, getting the feeling of being watched by countless eyes in the dark. Looking back at Xavier, he hesitates for a few seconds before he adjusts his grip on the umbrella, shielding us completely from view. He hurries, so I walk faster to catch up with him. We almost end up running.

When we leave those gazes behind, Xavier and I stand under the shade on the side of the street. We eat bread as we watch the

03 | Collision

endless rain. I take a bite out of my bread and glance at Xavier, my gaze eventually landing on the sword on his back.

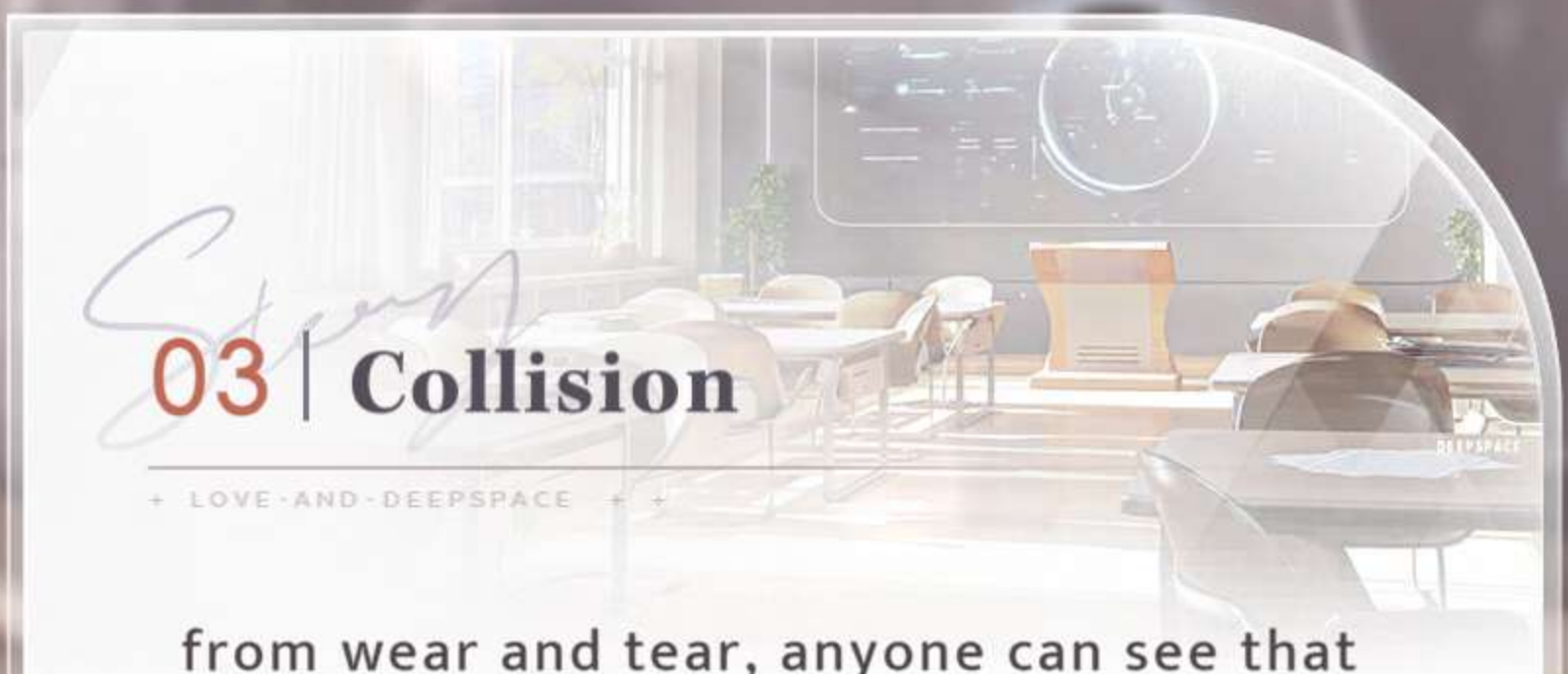
"Xavier, can I look at your sword?"

He's a little confused, but he still takes his sword out of its sheath and hands it to me.

All of a sudden, I feel nervous. I wipe both my hands on my shirt and take it from him.

I run my hand along the wooden sword, feeling every groove beneath my fingertips. Wooden swords aren't sharpened, and Xavier's isn't any different.

Even though there are countless marks



03 | Collision

from wear and tear, anyone can see that the quality of this sword is beyond average.

"Xavier, why do you like to train so much? You rarely take breaks when you train, and you're always carrying a sword around..."

"It's not that I like it." Xavier throws the empty wrapper into the trash. "It's the only thing I've been good at since I was a child."

I give him a confused look, waiting for him to continue, but he doesn't keep talking. Instead, with a glimmer in his eyes, he

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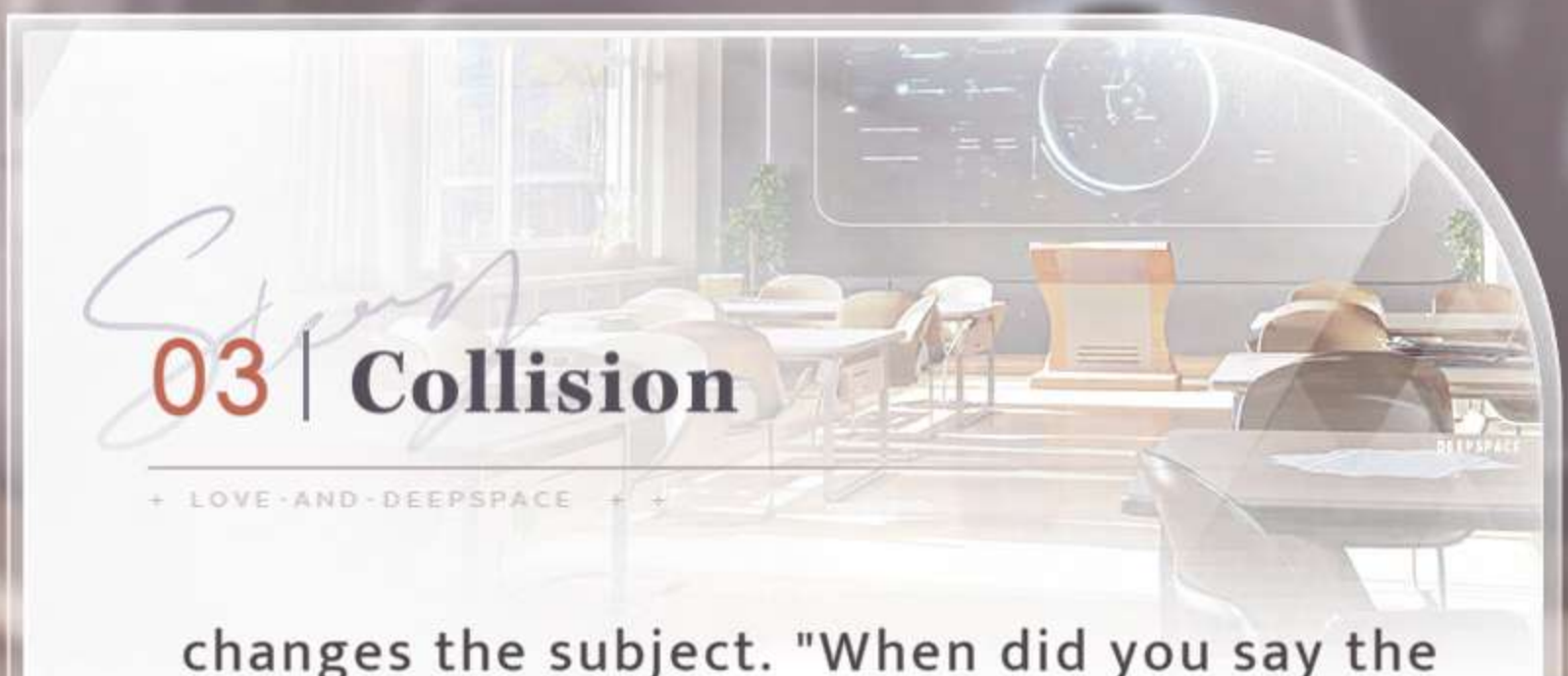

03 | Collision

changes the subject. "When did you say the meteor shower was?"

"Next week. Why? Do you want to come with me?"

I look up at Xavier with hope in my eyes, watching him stand there in silence. He seems hesitant, but within seconds, his expression stiffens. I follow his gaze, my smile fading from my face.

A group of familiar men are standing there with us under the shade. They say nothing, but their intentions are clear. Like a wall, the heavy rain is going to separate us.

03 | Collision

I look at Xavier, but he just stands there, staring at them. The tension between us continues to crumble, ready to collapse at any given moment. Finally, after a long silence, he gives in. As the rain falls on him, Xavier hands me the still-dripping umbrella and leaves with them.

Later, I asked Xavier what would happen if he didn't leave that night. He thinks about it, and then says to reach for freedom is to give it up.

It took me a long time to understand what he meant.

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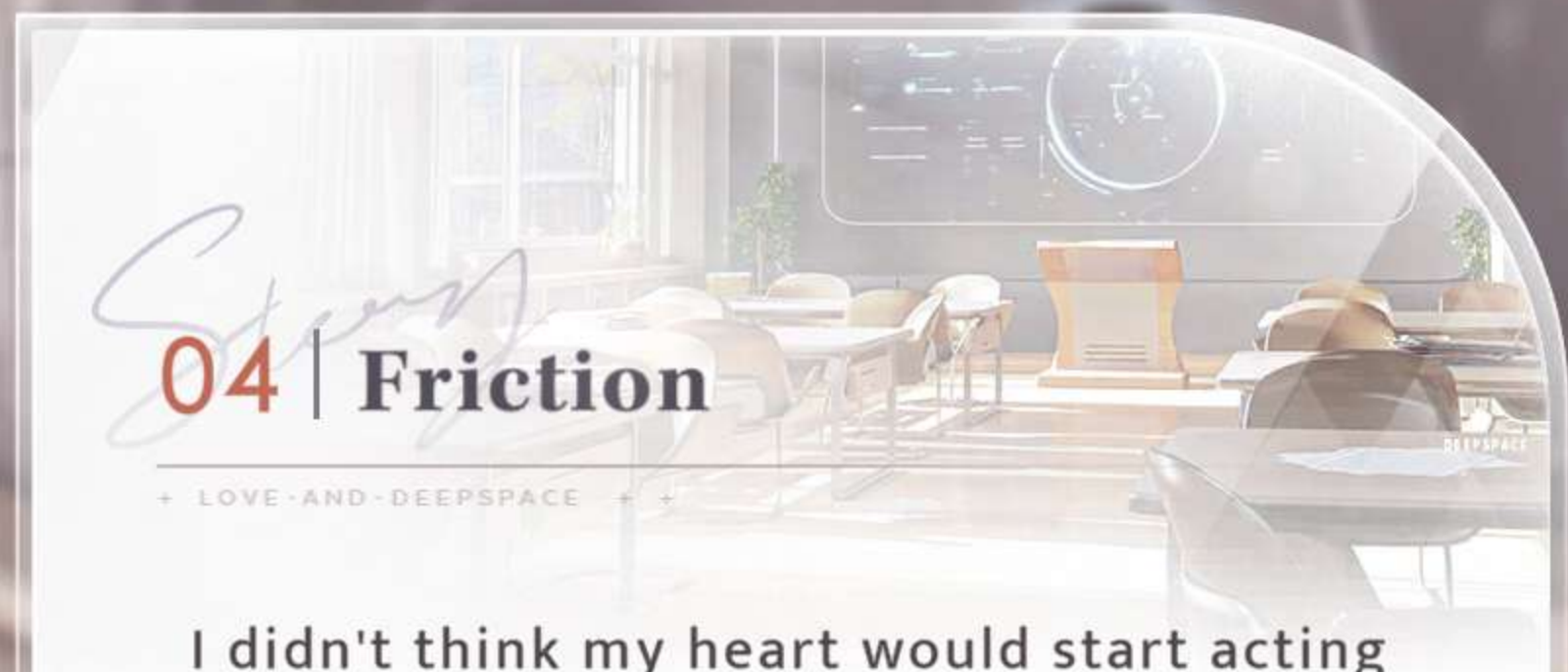
+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

If wishing on a star does make your wish come true, then I wish I could be healthy. Then I can wait another hundred years to watch the meteor shower with Xavier.



Story

04 | Friction

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

I didn't think my heart would start acting up before I could even wish upon a star.

The Academy's AC works without any care for the patients, blasting cold air into the room. I crack open an eye to glance at Xavier. It's only then I realize the cold isn't coming from the AC.

A single movement from our eyes could break this silence.

I haven't thought of how to explain myself yet, so I turn my back to him. I listen to the rattle of the medicine bottle in his hands. It rattles and rattles and rattles and

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04 | Friction

rattles. It's a little irritating, but soon enough, he puts it down with a clack.

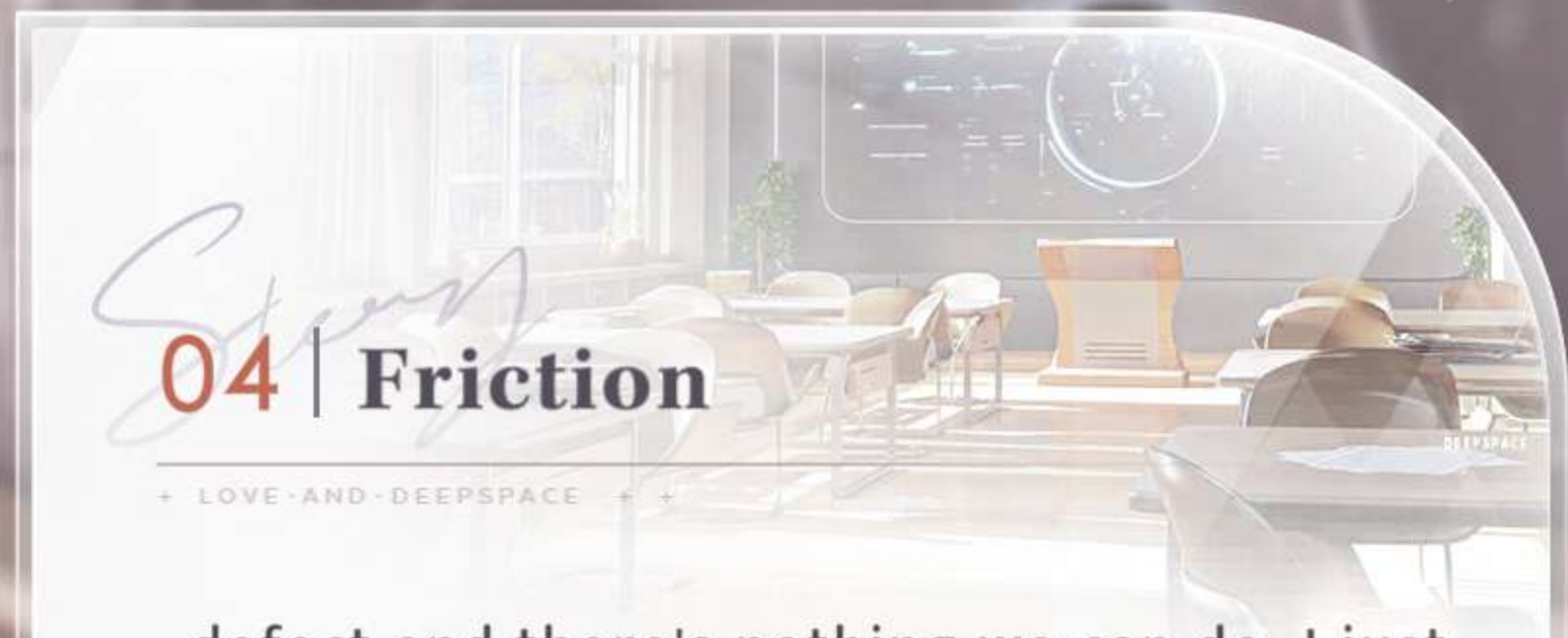
"How long were you going to hide this from me if you didn't faint in class today?"

"..."

"Don't pretend to be asleep. I know you're awake." His tone is soft, but it makes it all the more difficult to avoid him.

I turn around, deciding to face this head-on. "Where do I start..."

I thought about how to answer this question. I can tearfully recount the story of my birth, or I can say it's a rare birth



04 | Friction

defect and there's nothing we can do. I just never thought my words would turn into incomprehensible mush by the time they reached my mouth. I stumble through my explanation, and I don't even know if he understood any of it. I sit up on the bed, pretending to be patient as I wait for him to say something.

"What's Protocore Syndrome?" He looks up at me after reading the label on the medicine bottle.

"It's probably... a terminal illness that makes my heart weaker and weaker?"

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04 | Friction

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

"Is there no cure?"

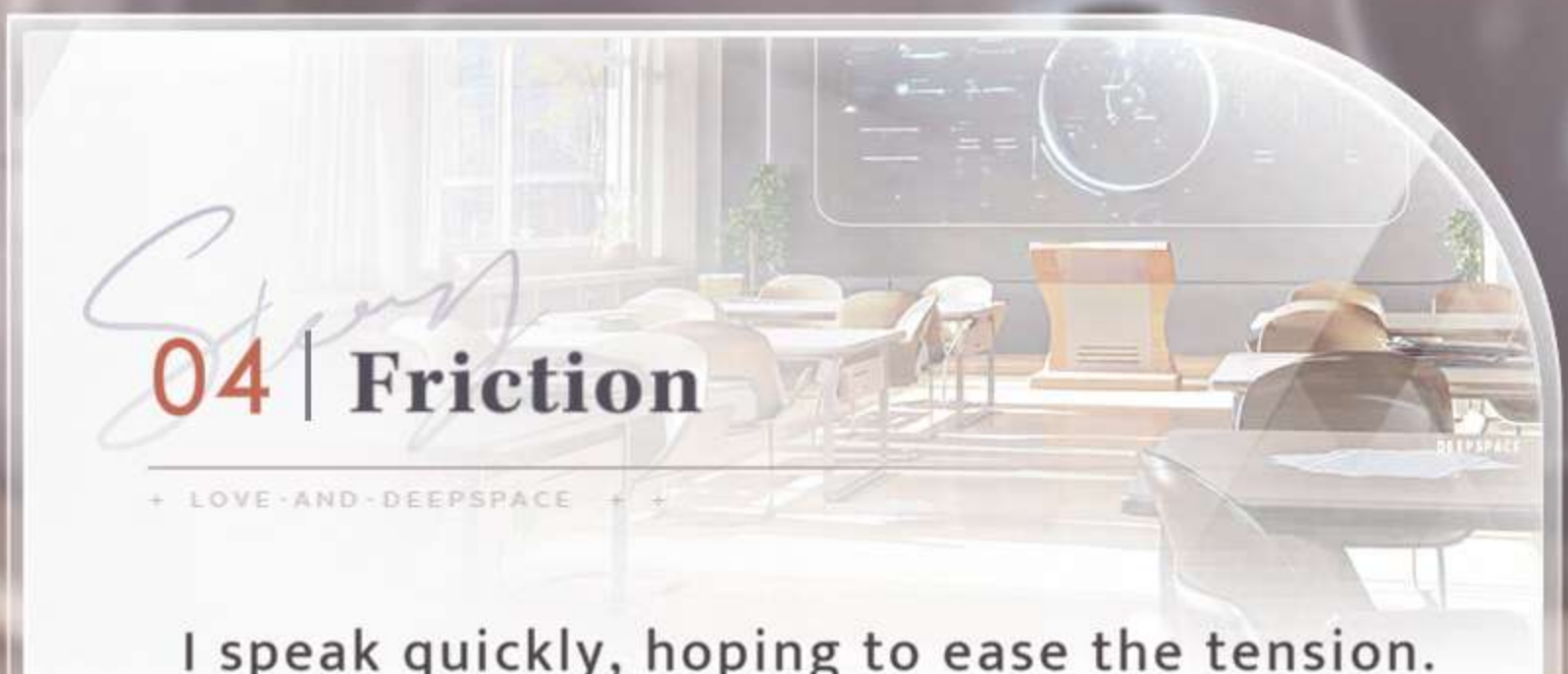
"There is... but we need a special Protocore."

"What kind?"

"They say there's a Protocore that can cure any illness..."

Xavier doesn't respond, but I can see his eyebrows scrunch up and his eyes dancing across the room.

"Philos is huge. It will take ages to find it. Don't worry, I'll be all right for now because of the medicine... Besides, maybe a miracle might happen, and I'll be cured."



04 | Friction

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

I speak quickly, hoping to ease the tension. But when Xavier glances at me, he looks completely unfazed. Quietly, he turns to observe the sunset from the window. Then he looks back at me.

"Let's watch the meteor shower together."

05 | Incineration

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

The late autumn wind blows away the last of the humid summer, carefree in its passing.

It has almost been 24 hours since I last slept. I lie in bed tossing and turning, unable to steady my restless heart. I can only wait for the darkened sky to light up again, and then wait for the brightened sky to darken once more.

Then, my alarm rings in the early hours of the next morning.

The train ride is bumpy. After it stops at the station, I'm still a long way from

05 | Incineration

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

Skymirror Salt Flat. As I walk, I go from a stroll to a run. Running across the moonlit slope and through the winding path, I finally see the mirror-like lake that's akin to a shard of a dream.

And standing in the center of the flat, underneath the still starry sky, is a familiar figure.

This is the first time I've seen Xavier without his uniform. His figure is perfectly illuminated by the moonlight. I hurry to him, stepping into the water that doesn't even reach my ankles.

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05 | Incineration

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

Xavier turns, the breeze bringing a sweet, cool, refreshing scent reminiscent of moonlight to me. He grabs my hand unexpectedly, taking me to the trestle bridge to sit.

I sit with one leg over the other, swinging them over the edge. I remember something and begin to look around.

Xavier sits down next to me. Then, as though he can read my mind, he says, "You don't have to check. They're not here."

"Truly? You got rid of them?"

"Yes."

05 | Incineration

+ LOVE·AND·DEEPSPACE + +

I vaguely sense Xavier's gaze being a little evasive, but quickly, his eyes become even brighter from the light reflected on the ground.

"Why are you thinking about others when you requested I watch the meteor shower with you?"

Before I can answer, a star flies across the salt flat’s reflection. "It's starting!"

Xavier and I look up at the same time.

The dark, inky sky is illuminated by various colors. Clusters of stars light up the sky one after the other, appearing and

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05 | Incineration

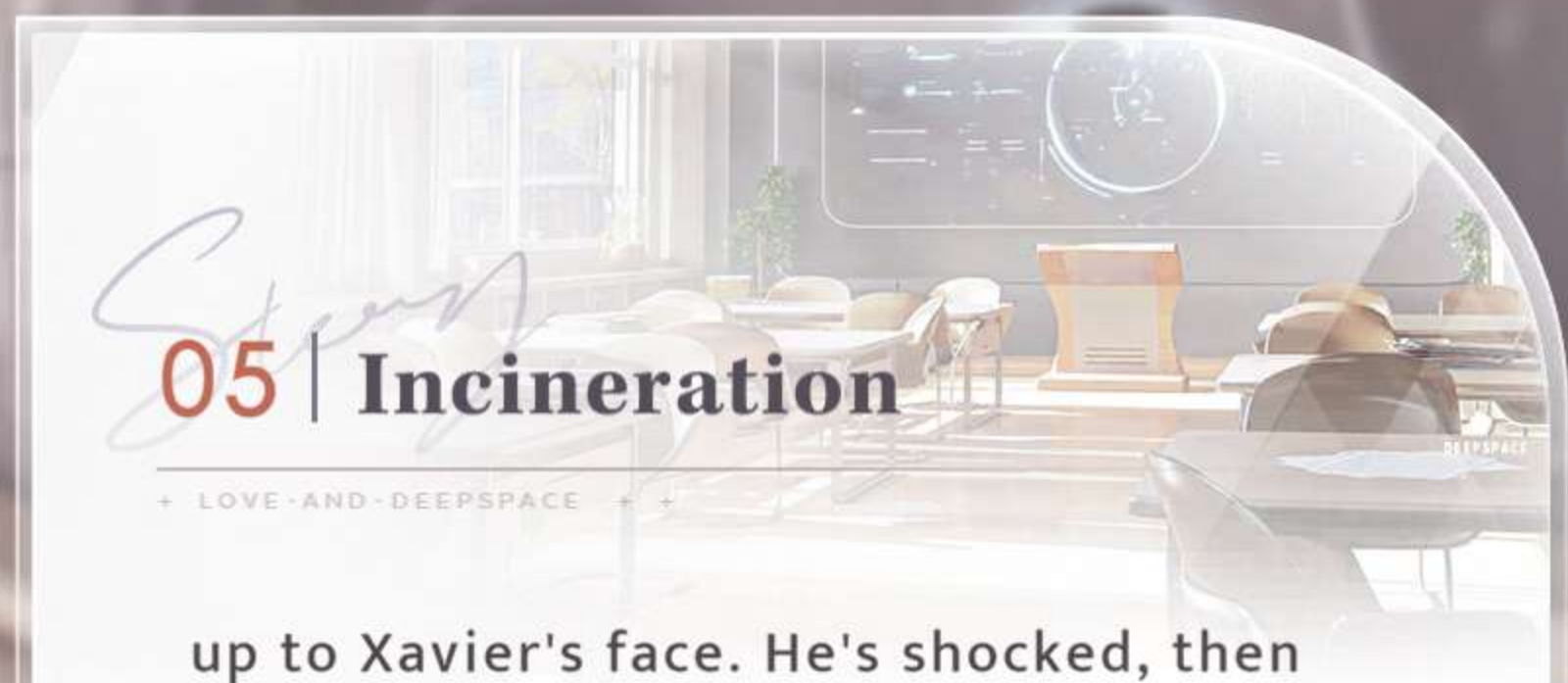
disappearing. It's as if only Xavier and I exist in this world, and only the two of us see this meteor shower. I clasp my hands and make a wish. When I open my eyes, I see Xavier is also doing the same thing.

I ask what he wished for, but he shakes his head and says he can't tell me.

We sit there, between heaven and earth, until the sky turns lilac. Then we stand up.

"Wait, I have something I want to give you."

I hastily unzip my bag. I pull out a sword tassel with a star-shaped charm and hold it



05 | Incineration

up to Xavier's face. He's shocked, then takes it from me.

"Did you make this yourself?" he asks.

"I did... I know it's sort of ugly, but—"

"It looks good." He interrupts me, and then hands the tassel back. "Can you help me put it on?"

I smile at Xavier and put the tassel on his sword. I give one last look, full of longing, to the salt flat. I try to drag him back the way we came, but I notice he stopped moving.

"What's wrong?"

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05 | Incineration

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

Xavier quietly stares at me.

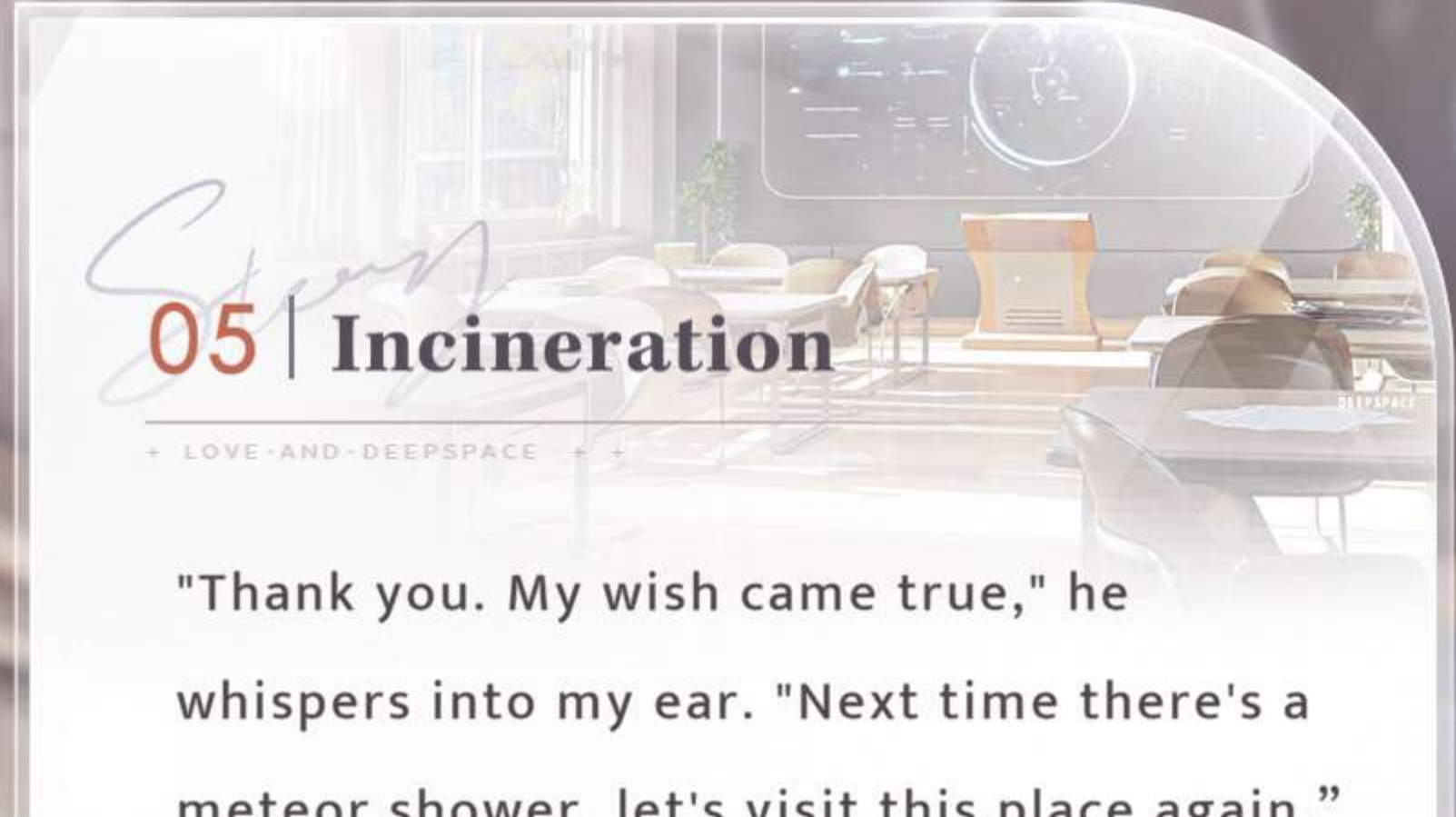
"Can I hug you?"

"What?" Thinking I misheard him, I look into his eyes for confirmation.

"Can I hug you?" He repeats himself. His tone is soft, fluttering to my ears like the wind.

Before I can react, he takes a few steps closer and leans down to hug me, all in one motion executed with calm precision. I'm stunned. Then, my hands slowly climb up his back.

So, this is what it feels like to hug him.



05 | Incineration

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

"Thank you. My wish came true," he whispers into my ear. "Next time there's a meteor shower, let's visit this place again."

I nod.

I wish time stopped at this moment, and I hope my wish can come true.

But was this the price I had to pay for my selfishness?

Ever since that night, which was the brightest point of my life, everything became fleeting, fading like a shooting star.

06 | Stardust Trail

+ LOVE-AND-DEEPSPACE + +

It's an awful disease.

Ever since the meteor shower, I've only gotten more ill. My trips to the hospital became more and more frequent until, one day, I simply couldn't leave. It's nothing I didn't expect. It's just I didn't expect it to be so soon. What actually surprised me was that I never saw Xavier again. He just disappeared without a trace. No one knew where he went.

I tried to contact him, of course, but to no avail. One, two, three days pass, and I get more and more anxious. Just as I sneak out

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06 | Stardust Trail

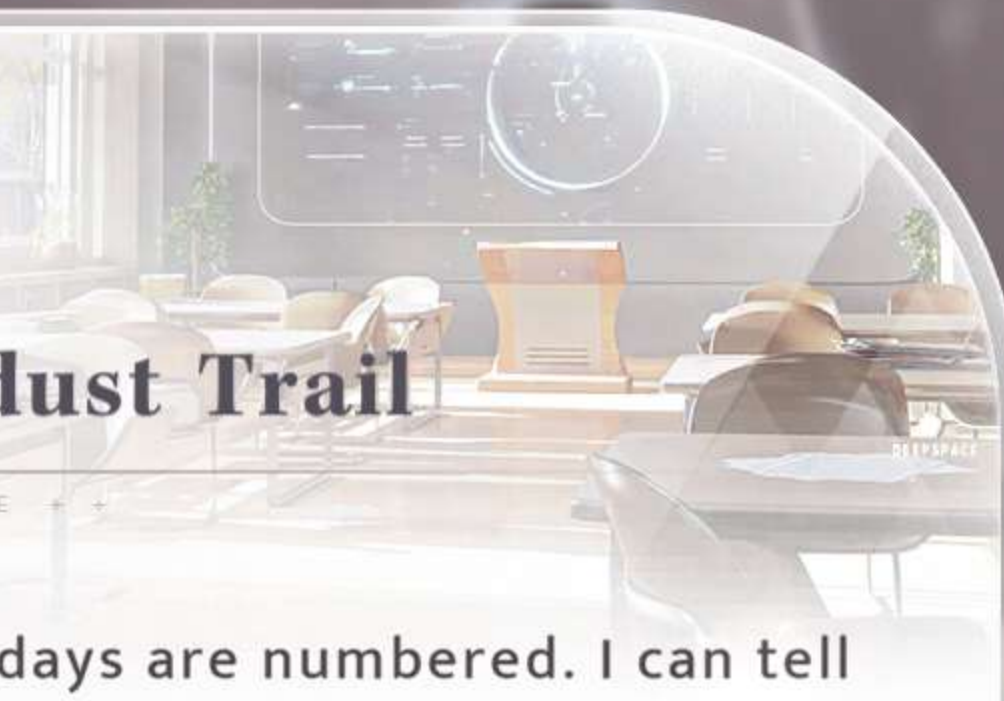
+ LOVE·AND·DEEPSPACE + +

of my room, with barely enough strength to leave the hospital room, I recall what he said about how reaching for freedom is to give it up.

Did he lose his freedom when he went to watch the meteor shower with me?

I lie on the hospital bed every day, tossing and turning, deep in thought like the night before the meteor shower. But the sky doesn't light up any quicker with my dark thoughts. Likewise, no matter how much I think about Xavier, he doesn't appear.

Even if I am stupid, it's hard to miss the



06 | Stardust Trail

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fact that my days are numbered. I can tell from the look on the nurse's face whenever she comes in.

Besides, this withering heart is mine.

Exactly one month after the meteor shower, I force myself to sneak out of the hospital and return to the salt flat, even if it's for that promise.

I have a feeling he'll be there.

It's amazing, to hear the salt crunch beneath my feet. Despite it not being too long ago, I was able to run and jump the last time I was here. I sit on the trestle

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bridge for a long time. Longer than I did on the night I watched the meteor shower with Xavier. After all, there *is* no next time.

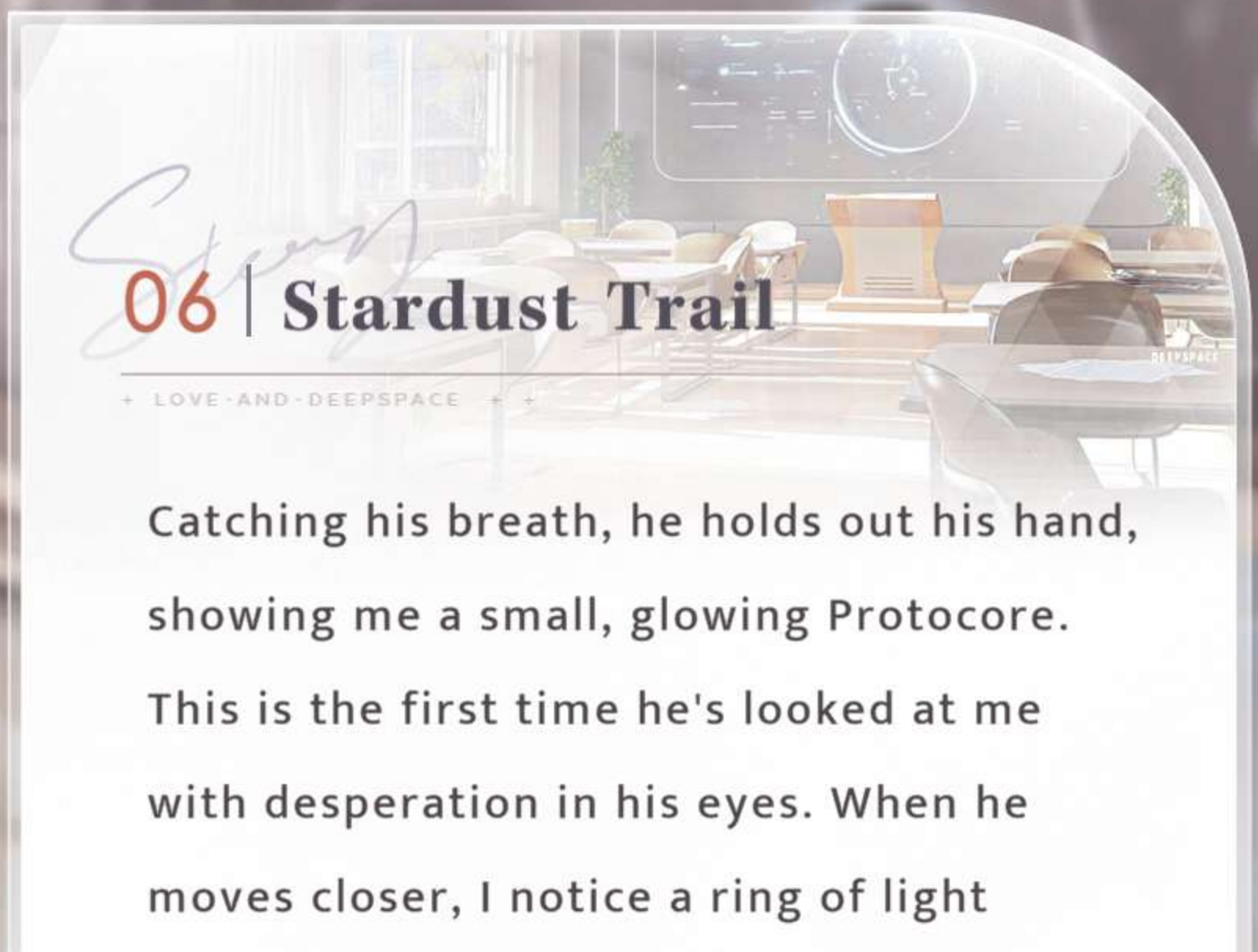
Just as I prepare to leave, I see a star reflected in the distance. It hangs on the pommel of a wooden sword, swinging this way and that.

It's Xavier.

He's running.

To me.

He stops in front of me. It is only then that I notice the wounds on his hands and face.



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Catching his breath, he holds out his hand, showing me a small, glowing Protocore.

This is the first time he's looked at me with desperation in his eyes. When he moves closer, I notice a ring of light around his neck. It's a striking, suffocating red.

"...Did you exchange your freedom for this?"

He doesn't answer. He says this is the Protocore that can save me. He found it.

But this withering heart is still in me. It's a flickering candle about to go out at any

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moment, holding on only by my desire to see Xavier again.

I reach out and touch the wounds on his face. Some of the blood has already dried.

I don't understand why Xavier, so calm and clever, would risk his life without a thought. He's willing to dive headfirst into danger for this dying heart of mine.

"It's too late." I want to touch Xavier's neck, but I only grab air. "Return the Protocore to where you found it, all right?"

Xavier doesn't say anything. He clutches the Protocore until his knuckles turn

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white. "You promised we would watch the meteor shower again."

"We have our own destinies... Some things can't be forced..." I reach out and poke the corner of his mouth. "Don't be sad. I've been very happy this past month."

I don't know why, but even though I don't want to cry, tears begin to fall just as I finish speaking. Xavier wipes them away.

Around us, the mirror-like salt flat connects heaven and earth, making the sky seem so boundless. And at the same time, it makes us feel so small.

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"...Talk to me." I point at the space beside me, letting him sit a little closer.

His gaze softens. After a while, he relaxes his grip on the Protocore, letting it fall to the ground, and sits beside me.

"...If I wasn't sick, would you watch the stars with me?"

"Yes." Xavier puts an arm around me, letting me lean on his shoulder. "Not just the stars. I'll show you the mountains and rivers, the sun and the moon. We'll see them together."

"Okay, but not the mountains. Hiking is a

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lot of work. I don't want to..."

"No matter what happens, I'll be by your side. And no matter how long you rest, I'll wait for you."

"All right, since you insist, I'll just... have to... agree..." Leaning on Xavier's shoulder and dreaming of a disease-free future makes me happy. I feel my strength gradually disappear. I use whatever I have left to look up at the sky.

"It's a shame... There are no stars tonight..."

"There is one."

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I see him hold out his hand in front of me, his palm glowing. It's like that time in the auditorium, but tonight, the light seems brighter.

His shooting star is shining for me again.

I close my eyes and whisper my final wish.

"I wish to meet you in my next life... I wonder if that will come true..."

"...It will."

He holds my hand. It's nice and warm. I nod reassuringly at him, then I feel as though someone is calling my name from above.

My eyelids feel heavy.

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Then, I can't open them anymore.

In the final moments of my life, I feel like I'm being held. I hear sounds similar to stars burning in the sky, one after the other, as if another brilliant, grand meteor shower has appeared. With the scent reminiscent of the moon, a warm, gentle voice reaches my ear like a shooting star. "No matter how many times it takes, no matter where you are... I will find you."